

A PORTRAIT OF LITERACY: MEANING-MAKING IN THE LIFE OF A  
RURAL INDIANA PRESCHOOLER AND HER FAMILY

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This is dedicated in memory of my maternal grandmother,  
Willia Sheckles Wright.  
Her spirit of strength and perseverance is my inheritance.

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Thanks be to God for His indescribable gifts!

Denice W. Honaker

A Portrait of Literacy: Meaning-Making in the Life of a Rural Indiana  
Preschooler and her Family

Qualitative methodology was utilized to create literary portraits of meaning making through oral and printed texts in the life of a young learner who resides in the rural farmlands of East Central Indiana. As a qualitative researcher, I used interviews and field observations “to uncover the complexities of ‘voice’ that provide answers and sometimes questions for research” (Chapman, 2005, p. 27). The purpose of this study was to understand how to empower families by supporting them in a deeper understanding and definition of literacy, to identify these practices in their own daily lives, and to communicate this with the professional educators with whom they interact. Insight was gained to help educators more clearly understand family literacy practices, use this knowledge in supporting children’s transition to school, and better connect family literacy with the classroom environment and instructional practices.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Introduction to the Study**

Nestled in a quiet subdivision on the north side of Richmond, Indiana, Creekwood Elementary School is one of nine elementary schools in the city. Students in kindergarten through grade six are bused from distant neighborhoods while some walk from the subdivision in which the school is located. Built in 1965, the russet brick exterior walls are interrupted by an extensive row of craft-dotted windows. Cappuccino –colored cinder block walls form long, brightly lit hallways decorated with colorful “Welcome Back to School” posters. This first week of school has been hectic and wonderful. Exhausted teachers walk back from taking the students to the buses at the end of the day. I overhear two fellow kindergarten teachers’ conversation. “These kids just don’t know anything!” one exclaims. “Their parents do nothing to get them ready for school,” and others, every year the kids seem to know less and less,” and “I don’t know how they expect us to teach them everything that’s expected when they come in knowing nothing.”

Why would it matter if kindergarten teachers have this belief? What implications does this attitude bring to education and, even more importantly, to the students in their classrooms? Is it a problem for classroom teachers to see their students as knowing “nothing?” Is there a disconnect between these teachers, the students and their families that does not support recognizing what “should be known” and the wealth of knowledge, skills and dispositions children are acquiring from birth to age five?

There seems to be a foundational misunderstanding and inconsistency regarding the definition of literacy and what children “need to know” that is feeding a growing accusation that young learners are entering public school knowing “nothing.” I use the term “accusation” because blame is almost automatically directed toward the parents and families of these children who have failed to adequately prepare their children for school particularly in terms of academic skills and knowledge.

My belief, based upon years as a teacher and years of studying literacy in early childhood education, is that experiences with oral language and printed texts and the meaning making around these experiences during a child’s first years are literacy learning experiences that form the foundations for learning traditional, school literacies. I adhere to the perspective that literacy is and should be seen as a relational, social event, supported and strengthened through shared experiences (Street, 1995; Makin, L., Diaz, C.J., & McLachlan, C., 2007). These experiences are certainly shared in school between the learner and teacher, as well as between learners and their peers, but as importantly, they are shared between the learner and the close family and friends in that learner’s out-of-school life. I am interested in supporting families to recognize the “natural” literacy learning that is already happening in their homes prior to their children’s entrance into formal education, to understand how to expand upon natural learning opportunities, and to acknowledge the essential role home- and family-life have in preparing young children for school and lifelong learning.

It is to be noted that all names of people included in this study are pseudonyms to protect the identity of said individuals. The names of locations including Wayne County, Indiana, and the descriptions of the setting include the names of real places.

### **Defining Rural**

The urban population is well-represented in literacy research. I am interested in the rural population and how families who raise their children in rural settings might be supported to recognize everyday life as an opportunity to help children develop literacy skills through the words and experiences shared between these young learners and the adults who surround them. In this research, I choose to define “rural” in the sense of physical location and population. The physical location of the community in which I conducted my research is not highly populated and not near a densely populated city. Wayne County, Indiana, is located in the east-central part of the state on the Ohio border; it covers an area of approximately 402 square miles. Settlers, mostly Quaker, began locating in the county as early as 1806 because of its rich farmland and convenient geography. Because of its central location and accessibility to many areas of the United States, Wayne County acquired the nickname “Crossroads of America.” As from the beginning, agriculture continues to be important to the local economy (Waynet.org).

According to the 2014 U.S. census, there are 67,671 people living in Wayne County (U.S. Census Bureau) with an average of approximately 170 people per square mile. Though there is a growing Hispanic population in the

area, the 2013 census (U.S. Census Bureau) estimates 91.0% of residents in the county are “White alone,” five percent are Black or African American alone, and the remaining four percent of the population identify themselves as Hispanic/Latino, American Indian, Asian, or of “two or more races.” There are 14 small cities and towns in Wayne County (though some share the same addresses) including the county seat of Richmond.

Richmond is the largest city in Wayne County and the county seat. The birthplace of recorded jazz music, it was once a booming town at the crossroads of the Midwest. With industry having come and mostly now gone, the former “City of Roses” is striving for a renewed identity and holding to a hope of growth and development. Outside of Richmond, clusters of homes designate small towns in communities of corn, soy beans, and dairy farmers dotted with occasional small business owners.

Not all young learners in rural areas live on farms, but there is a particular, unique culture surrounding the corn fields and livestock pastures of rural areas. “Traditional rural literacy may be considered a way of reading rural life ...that considers objects as both texts and things. As texts, the objects (including the signs, symbols, and texts of rural life) are read in an effort to make sense of the world” (Edmondson, 2003, p. 50).

## **The Study**

Making meaning from everyday objects and experiences and creating story from these “artifacts” is what Pahl and Rowsell (2011) called artifactual critical literacy. Drawing from the ideas within critical literacy that the stories,

behaviors and experiences brought to the classroom by students are “funds of knowledge;” such artifacts can be seen to represent the wealth of contributions each child has to make to his learning community. Young children and their families actively co-construct meaning around the items and experiences in their homes and within their lives that are significant to them.

Everyday objects and life experiences may first appear to be inconsequential. It was my desire to investigate a way to empower families by encouraging them rethink the position of the “clutter” that surrounds them and to recognize its role as part of a natural process of literacy development (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011). “Writing and literacy activities can be found embedded within material objects such as embroidery and craft objects, such as book marks, and can be found strewn across homes in ways that weave writing in the fabric of the everyday” (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011, p. 133). Artifactual critical literacy creates an equitable space for literacy learning in that students who may feel marginalized in formal school literacies are given opportunities to share the meaning-making process with their peers and family members. Multimodal texts identified in the homes of families in rural Indiana will, most certainly, revolve around objects in the homes and experiences with the family.

Similarly, it was also my desire to communicate to kindergarten teachers the benefits of recognizing and using the experiences, knowledge and skills their students bring with them to school. I am interested in supporting teachers in becoming what Janks (2010) referred to as a “critical literacy teacher” who not only supports learners in making meaning with and from texts but also focus on

what the texts do to the readers. Starting the school year with a focus on building on what is already known and practiced rather than an attitude of deficit could have a positive impact on the classroom environment and student learning.

Through this study, I created a portrait of literacy for one rural Indiana preschool-aged child about to enter kindergarten by focusing on her oral language, relationships with others, and her daily literacy. Defining literacy as a socio-cultural process of making meaning, I explored the role of adult-child relationships in modeling literate behaviors and motivating the young preschooler's literacy learning throughout the experiences of the daily lives of the child within the context of the family.

A range of factors regarding the family and communities that surround them contribute to the development of literacy in children "including frequency of children's outings with adults, number of maternal outings, emotional climate of the home, and the amount of time interacting with adults" (Auerbach, 2012, p. 207). Auerbach (2012) worked with the University of Massachusetts at Boston English Family Literacy Program which "provides English literacy instruction to parents of bilingual students so that they, in turn, can support the literacy development of their children" (Auerbach, 2012, p. 200).

Findings from the Auerbach (2012) study provide justification for my key assumption in this study that family literacy experiences matter. Specifically, Auerbach concluded that traditional school-like literacy activities were not relevant in increasing success in emergent readers, whereas various interactions between the children and the important, close adults in their lives using literacy

integrated naturally into their daily routines made a significant impact on literacy achievement (Auerbach, 2012).

In addition, I examined daily practices of oral language and other literacy practices in the home in my study through observations and interviews in order to better understand and to characterize what children know and bring to their learning as they enter formal schooling. One of my major assumptions in beginning this study was not only do early experiences in the home and family life matter in a child's literacy development, but that there is danger in ignoring home literacies. Doing so causes us to apply and privilege traditional school expectations and those who align with them, and it causes us to narrow our understanding of the acquisition of language and literacy. I believe that literacy expectations for young learners should not be reduced to a checklist of skills that can be demonstrated through the completion of worksheets and standardized tests. Such a narrow view of literacy fails to promote the critical thinking needed in our complex world and results in fragmented knowledge that distorts broader understandings (Macedo, 2006).

A case study conducted by J. and B. Street (1995) in a suburb of a large American city revealed many literacies within the community, homes and workplaces of the participants in the study. Questions were raised of how one type of literacy has become that which sets the standard for other literacies. In fact, it was also noted that non-school literacies were often perceived as "inferior attempts at the real thing, to be compensated for by enhanced schooling" (p. 106). My research provides an ethnographically-based view of literacy as social



practices, and at its foundation is my belief that schooled literacy is not superior to other literacies.

Specifically, the research questions that guided this study include:

- What opportunities are observed to be present in the family's rural home and family life that do or may support natural literacy learning in a preschool-aged child during the period of time before she enters kindergarten?
- What is a rural family's perspective of literacy learning in general and, specifically, how it occurs through shared experiences with their child? In other words, do families recognize home literacy experiences as "learning," or do they see them as naturally occurring parts of daily life?
- Does a kindergarten teacher use information regarding her students' home literacies to support students' transitions into school and to inform instruction in her classroom?

The overall purpose of this study was to come to understand how to empower families by supporting them in a deeper understanding and definition of literacy, to identify these practices in their own daily lives, and to communicate this with the professional educators with whom they interact. Insight was gained to help educators more clearly understand family literacy practices, use this knowledge in supporting children's transition into school, and better connect family literacy with the classroom environment and instructional practices.

Ultimately, my personal goal in this research was to give back to my community. I have had the privilege of teaching many children in the small, rural

area of Wayne County, Indiana, and appreciate the trust families have shown me in allowing me to teach and learn with their young children. What I have witnessed in public elementary schools was a disconnect between what was happening in the homes before entering kindergarten and the expectations of literacy learning in that first year of school. Children come with unique backgrounds of words, experiences, and adult-child relationships that have molded what they know about their language and how it works. I want to support families and educators in recognizing that literacy learning has already been happening before the child walks through the school doors and that teachers must start with “the known” (what each child knows) to scaffold continued development of literacy skills. We must recognize and respect that children do not come to school with “nothing,” but that they approach their “formal” education having a wealth of experiences upon which to build. It does not have to be a competition of school literacies versus home literacies because everyone “wins” if and when both parts of a child’s community work together to support meaning making.

Several bodies of literature are explored to support understanding of these topics to begin answering some of these questions. The Literature Review is presented in chapter two of this dissertation and focuses on the definition of literacy, a socio-cultural perspective of literacy, family literacy and adult-child interactions, literacy in formal school settings and existing methods of examining literacy.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Review of the Literature**

“Children are ... active seekers of meaning who construct knowledge about literacy as they work to make sense of the literate world around them” (Gregory, et.al. 2004, p. 15). Each child’s home environment provides a unique opportunity in which the young learner can hear language and gain experience through everyday activities. The adults who surround children in their homes and communities provide sources of modeling, shared language (verbal and nonverbal), literacy experiences, and cultural understanding for the child. The research I have included in this literature review highlights views regarding the definition of literacy, the belief that literacy is a social act supported through daily experiences, and the perspective that interactions with families, particularly adults, in the lives of children are an important component of literacy learning. These ideas will inform the discussion of findings related to early and emergent literacy in the home and the formal school setting and address the research questions presented in Chapter One of this dissertation.

#### **Definition of Literacy**

What does it mean to be literate? Barton (2001) shared the view that “... questions about what literacy is and what it means to be literate are often confined to reading and writing. Literacy is much broader than this. It includes talking, listening, viewing and drawing, as well as critiquing” (Barton, 2001, as cited by Diaz, 2007, p. 32). Traditionally, the idea of literacy has been restricted to reading and writing text, primarily what is found in school classrooms and

standardized reading curriculum. This narrow view of literacy limits it to individually-focused skills and fails to consider it as a socially-developed process in which each person dynamically engages within the context of their surroundings (Gee, 1990). As Barton (2001) said:

A focus on the individual's capacity to decode meanings in paper-based text, devoid of the social influences within which texts are constructed, fails to acknowledge the social phenomena in which literacy is based. Such a focus can restrict literacy and its uses to schooled literacy. (p. 56).

Literacy begins in the womb as developing ears hear the language of the mother and other close adults around them (Hepper, Scott & Shahidullah, 1992). After birth, language continues to be learned through relational interactions with other people and media that surround their young ears in the environment. These early experiences with language are the foundation for literacy practices later in life.

The term 'emergent literacy' is used to "describe how literacy knowledge grows over time when human beings are engaged in purposeful literacy experiences in the company of more experienced readers and writers" (Gregory, Long & Volk, 2004; Sulzby, 1986). Campbell (2000) reported on research conducted with a young learner named Alice, identifying the activities that primarily contributed to her literacy development including: "the numerous readings and rereading of books; the opportunities for writing; writing her own

name; looking at letters; and the songs, nursery rhymes and rhyming books which supported Alice's literacy development" (p. 139).

Campbell (2000) emphasized that it is not just the act of reading a book that makes a difference, but that talking with the child about the book is the component that supports oral language and vocabulary development. He noted that, with Alice, "sometimes the book was simply read to her but more usually it was like a conversation..." (Campbell, 2000, p. 140). Conversations surrounding text allow children to connect with the experiences of fellow readers and broaden relationships with those in their personal worlds.

Repeated reading of the same book is another important strategy when sharing stories with young children that contributes to literacy development. Frequent readings lead children to memorize and then participate in the reading; repeated readings enable the child to know the book and own the words and story. "The talking about books and the reading of them by significant adults became a dominant feature of a child's involvement with literacy" (Campbell, 2000, p. 155).

Diaz (2007) reported on the research of Kress (2003), Lankshear and Knobel (2003) about this broader conceptualization of early literacy learning:

It is paramount that we go beyond understandings of early literacy as pre-reading and pre-writing, listening and talking to include the variety of literacy practices with which children engage and through which they construct meaning. Conceptualisations about literacy must take account of the social practices of which literacy is part,

including practices around listening, speaking, writing, viewing and critiquing. These practices encompass a range of symbolic meaning systems that are linguistic, visual, audio, spatial and gestural. (p. 33)

Defining literacy in narrow terms, separate from the important related social practices, institutions and ideologies from which it is constituted may eventually limit our understandings about literacy and prevent us from exploring and knowing the diverse ways in which we can create, connect, and build upon children's nascent understanding of literacy. Some of the more traditional ways of viewing literacy fail to consider, and honor, the variety of ways in which we read and interpret situations and how we share, communicate and create meanings about our lives and our world. Existing research suggests it is crucial that literacy definitions consider the social practices and situations woven throughout daily uses of words within natural and familial contexts.

### **Socio-cultural Perspective of Literacy**

Literacy is all about meaning, and meaning is culturally sensitive. There are multiple levels of meaning in oral language and written texts which are often dependent on the circumstances and settings in which the words are used. It is important to understand that meanings of texts, whether oral, written, or visual, are created and situated within a social and cultural setting (Street, 1984).

Literacy is built around interactions and relationships with others. It is not just a set of academic skills, but rather it is "...a human activity, springing and flowing from human needs and purposes and developing through the channels of

human relationships” (Rose, 2007, p. 8). A child’s first relationships are usually with caregivers and family, and “the home is often identified as a primary domain in people’s literacy lives” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 11). Barton and Hamilton (2000) further argued that “people’s understanding of literacy is an important aspect of their learning...” (p. 14).

Young children are capable of recognizing and thinking about printed texts and symbolize meanings. Therefore, according to Diaz (2007), young children are:

...able to begin to think critically about how these meanings influence their own thinking about the world and their relationships with people. The literacy practices that are important to the everyday lives of children do not take place in isolation to other social practices and interactions with adults, older children and peers. (p. 33)

Marie Clay (1991) emphasized the importance of conversations with young children to support the development of what she termed, “mature language” (p. 69). As she eloquently put it, “every sentence the child constructs is a hypothesis about language,” (p. 69). In other words, when a child speaks, they are attempting to make meaning, which in turn is either affirmed or rejected. Rejections require revisions of previous spoken words and new attempts to communicate which will eventually lead to the child’s message being accepted and their formation of a deeper understanding of how his language works.

Children require someone who can model speech, who will listen to them, and who will personally connect with them. This is typically found in the adults at home and in his community. As children participate in their daily lives, they “gain expertise in literacy practices that are directly relevant to their social and cultural experiences” (Diaz, 2007, p. 33). Because literacy is entrenched in almost everything we do, its connections to social situations and practices are important.

Early literacy learning is a “natural” practice in that literacy learning occurs throughout the daily lives of young children, in the context of their families, and their communities. As Gregory, Long and Volk (2004) explained:

Within a sociocultural framework, young children learn as *apprentices* alongside a more experienced member of the culture.

Crucial to a sociocultural approach, therefore, is the role of the mediator (a teacher, adult, more knowledgeable sibling or peer) in initiating children into new cultural practices or guiding them in the learning of new skills. (p. 7)

Not all types of literacy are utilized in the same manner, and not all literacy activities are equally valued. “Literacy activities are mediated through the values, beliefs and behaviours of the child’s culture...learning to be literate comes about through participation in particular cultural and social events” (Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2000). Storytelling may be of more importance or use in some cultures than in others, so the development of oral language skills would be a priority in those cultures with storytelling traditions. It is vital, therefore, to see literacy as a



complex, diverse progression of learning impacted by an individual's upbringing and situation.

Literacy has relevance as our youngest citizens make meaning through verbal and non-verbal communications and conversations, as well as symbols and printed texts that occur within the familial and cultural environment in which they are growing and developing.

### **Family Literacy and Adult-child Interactions**

Martello (2007) said: "A survey of early literacy practices among any group of people is almost certain to reveal an array of differences spanning anything from the language spoken at home to family habits around oral stories, songs, television or books" (p. 92). Through hearing and interrelating with others in the language of their homes or communities, children attain oral language. The foundations for understanding, valuing and using printed texts is also established in children's homes and other daily environments including childcare, church and other community settings.

Many families engage in reading books to and with their children. Findings of studies from homes with families other than the middle-class English-speaking populations have demonstrated literacy used extensively and expertly in a variety of ways including sharing oral histories, reading the Bible, deciphering recipes together, and reading and writing letters (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Friesen, 2011; Heath, 1983; Hicks, 2002; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Volk, 1997).

There are numerous other modes or means to exploring literacy practices in homes and community settings. As Martello (2007) said:

Pathways into visual and multimodal literacies also begin in the first years of life when children create and understand visual and multimodal texts. While drawings, paintings or models are easily recognized as visual images, children commonly create more elaborate multimodal representations with a wide range of materials such as sticks, sand, toys and household objects, which are used to represent other things. In dramatic play scenarios, children regularly draw upon linguistic, visual and gestural modes to make meanings. (p. 97)

Homes traditionally assumed by educators to be lacking in literacy are often found to be filled with print in many forms (Auerbach, 2012) Research in those settings provide windows into literacy worlds not previously acknowledged as legitimate, effective and valuable. As Gregory, Long and Volk (2006) stated:

In all settings, data illuminate the act of reading and learning to read and write as social processes; children as active, competent and intentional participants in those processes; and the emergence of literacy from birth. Children are described not as passive recipients of literacy knowledge, but as active seekers of meaning who construct knowledge about literacy as they work to make sense of the literate world around them (p. 15).

There is an assumption by some regarding how the family should contribute to a child's literacy development. Activities and tasks that resemble those performed in schools are often thought to be the most effective in

preparing children for classroom literacy. Auerbach (2012) shared that literacy programs that only support these school-defined literacy skills are missing other opportunities that also support the development of literacy. According to Auerbach:

Indirect factors including frequency of children's outings with adults, number of maternal outings, emotional climate of the home, amount of time spent interacting with adults, level of financial stress, enrichment activities, and parental involvement the child's education had a stronger effect on many aspects of reading and writing than did direct literacy activities. (p. 205)

### **Literacy in Formal School Settings**

Recognizing the expansive sociological issues relating to literacy is essential and particularly impactful in the field of early childhood education. Unlike more traditional views of literacy as narrowly focused on decoding and writing paper texts, seeing literacy through a social lens will encompass technology, embrace critical thinking, and acknowledge social, political and cultural conditions (Diaz, 2007). Without this broader scope of understanding, "the diverse literacies of children can be ignored or identified as deficits, unworthy of attention by educational institutions"(Diaz, 2007, p. 39). Embracing the ideas of social-critical literacy enables children to become active participants in how they develop, make meaning and use literacy experiences.

Too often, reading and writing are taught as discreet skills in schools, in effect, decontextualizing them from literacy as defined here, receiving, as Taylor

1998) characterized: “culturally remote pedagogical attention.” This approach is outcome-based, positioning literacy acquisition as an end in itself. “A skills approach to literacy runs counter to the natural development of reading and writing as complex cultural activities” (Taylor, 1998, p. 90). Reading and writing, in this view, are not tools used to communicate and understand, but as a set of skills to acquire.

Schools are urged to partner with parents to understand what literacy practices are already in place in the homes of its students (Gee, 2004; Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2000). Specific examples of how early childhood classroom literacy practices can be connected to home literacy practices include identifying the literacy-related activities in the home and engaging students in conversations and printed texts that support the ideas and meaning being developed during these home literacy activities. If families have a tradition of sharing stories at bedtime, then classroom activities can include storytelling as a way to connect with what the child already knows about language and literacy. If the father in a family enjoys a hobby such as building models or hunting, then the classroom teacher can use appropriate activities and texts to connect with the ideas, skills and vocabulary involved in these hobbies (Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2000) It is essential that literacy practices that begin in the homes of young children are validated, respected, and built upon when children enter school. Gee argued that ignoring home and community practices of children will not lead to feelings of belonging (Diaz, 2007).

In supporting literacy learning, it is essential to investigate and acknowledge ways children seek, analyze and digest information and skills from family, friends, and other environmental influences. “We need to know more of the learning styles, coping strategies, and social support systems of the children we teach if instruction in reading and writing is to be a meaningful complement to their lives” (Taylor, 1998, p. 93). Educators must broaden the lens through which they view children’s identities and understand who their students are beyond what they see in their classrooms. Partnering with communities and developing authentic relationships with families will invite opportunities for conversations and other exchanges of information is vital for this to occur (Diaz, 2007).

“As the variety of literacy experiences in different homes are acknowledged and respected, families come to believe that the literacy events they experience in their homes are legitimate roads to literacy” (Goodman, 2014, p. 56). Hopefully, this will result in a response from educational systems and curriculum publishers in the United State to be more sensitive to the variety of manners in which literacy is used and developed so the materials and curricula can support families in continuing solid literacy practices that are reflected in the classroom through instruction and learning activities.

## **Summary**

Literacy is a social practice encompassing reading and writing, and so much more. In attempts to analyze the tasks involved with reading and writing for inclusion in classroom instruction, literacy has become a checklist of abilities pushed upon learners at progressively younger ages. This checklist is created by

business-minded government officials in the name of proficiency and measurable outcomes, as well as consistency with little regards to the unique individuals sitting in the desks of our schools. In addition, kindergarten curriculum frequently positions literacy in specific terms that often do not recognize or affirm the oral language, social experiences and culture of children and their families. This narrow definition of literacy leads to statements from educators such as, “These children come to school knowing nothing!” In order to instruct effectively, educators must know their students. This includes the “whole child” – intellectual or cognitive and language, social and emotion, fine and gross motor, and cultural areas that reflect more than just a checklist of skills.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Method**

#### **Description of Method**

This is an ethnographic case study in which a form of qualitative methodology, portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), was utilized to create a literary portrait of meaning making in the lives of a young learner and her family who reside in the rural farmlands of East Central Indiana. I followed the daily life of a family in rural Wayne County, Indiana, and observed the preschool child and her family using descriptive and reflective field notes, and I video recorded to document the time I spent with them. Interviews with the mother were also documented using audio recording. In addition, I engaged in a creative project with the participating mother as we each constructed a collage portrait containing photographs of Isabella to represent the different literacies identified in the home and family life. Conversations during the creative project were also audio-recorded.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify potential family subjects through self-referral from families known by me who live in rural areas of Wayne County and have preschool-aged children at home. The preschool child was also enrolled in a school district which partners with Indiana University East (IUE) in professional development and where teacher candidates from IUE are regularly placed for field experiences for the Elementary Education program. This connection to IUE will support future collaboration between the elementary school and the university regarding research and classroom practices.

Opportunistic sampling occurred when the opportunity arose to interview a kindergarten teacher in the school in which Isabella was enrolled. She allowed me to talk with her about the curriculum currently being used in their school and the process of transitioning into the kindergarten classroom.

### **Researcher's Role**

I had an ever-changing role during the course of collecting data for this research study. I was a non-participant observer at times as I took field notes and collected video and audio recordings of the child and family members' words and actions. I was also a participant observer when I was invited to participate in some of the activities such as building sandcastles at the beach and playing dolls with the child. I was a coach for the mother as I supported her in identifying literacies within the everyday activities of the family life and guiding her to understand how these literacy practices supported continued literacy learning for her children. In addition, I filled a role of teacher for the mother in reflecting on the process of the study and defining and co-creating literacies during our conversations surrounding the creation of a collage portrait.

I recognize that these differing roles do not strictly conform to those traditionally held by a researcher within a case study or portraiture, but there was an unexpected revelation during my interactions with the family regarding the culture of literacy that lent to a more ethnographic focus in which I became a teacher to the mom. We were able to explore the idea of shared patterns of behavior, belief and language (Creswell, 2008) within the family and friends surrounding Isabella.



These roles also connect with the portraiture methodology. “Portraiture seeks to unveil the universal truths and resonant stories that lie in the specifics and complexity of everyday life” (Cahnmann-Taylor, M., 2008, p. 56). Using portraiture, the position of the researcher is unlike most other research methodologies because the researcher is carefully and purposefully situated within the research from beginning to end. The researcher, or portraitist, gives voice to herself and the participants, so “the multi-faceted nature of voice must be recognized, evaluated, and integrated within the telling of the data...there is no part of the research that goes untouched by some aspect of the researcher’s voice” (Chapman, 2005, p. 34).

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) addressed six ways that voice is used in portraiture including voice as autobiography, voice as preoccupation, voice in dialogue, voice as witness, voice as interpretation, and voice discerning other voices. Voice as autobiography was evident as, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis said:

the researcher brings [brought] her own history – familial, cultural, ideological, and educational – to the inquiry. Her perspective, her questions, and her insights are inevitably shaped by these profound developmental and autobiographical experiences. (p. 95).

I used the information and insight gathered from the observed life experiences of participants as sources for understanding, connecting and identifying with those placed in the setting. It was necessary to maintain balance, though, so that I did

not allow my own story to obscure or engulf the investigation (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997).

Voice as preoccupation was demonstrated as I revealed ways that my own beliefs, disciplinary background, understandings and assumption molded how and what I observed and the text created from the experience. As I deliberately placed myself in the middle of the research, voice in dialogue was demonstrated. The participants and I worked together to define meaning-making as we share ideas and views (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Voice as witness was apparent as I used voice to underscore where I stand. I distanced myself enough to be able to see the whole and to uncover patterns that the family members might not notice because of their preoccupation with what is happening (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Voice as interpretation is evident as I shared my interpretations and endeavors to make sense of the data. I asked, as Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) suggested, 'What is the meaning of this action, gesture or communication to the actors in this setting?' and 'What is the meaning of this to me?'" (p. 91). Finally, voice discerning other voices was manifested as I searched and listened for Mother's voice, attempted to catch the essence and meanings of the voice and transfer or duplicate that message into my text including carefully selected quotations (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Another unique aspect of the methodology of portraiture is the idea of "goodness" in that it "consciously seeks to identify the strengths of the site and

the ways in which challenges are addressed” (Chapman, 2005, p. 32). Portraiture offers an opportunity for research participants to see themselves as valuable and knowledgeable stakeholders in the research process (Chapman, 2005). I focused on and honored the strengths of the family in supporting their children’s literacy, even as I sought to help them better understand how, when and where literacy learning occurs in and outside the home during the course of their daily lives.

As data were collected, I constantly assessed what I had already gathered, analyzed what the data was saying and the meanings I was making of it, and determined if more data needed to be gathered. The data were put into segments and coded and then grouped into themes. The portrait took shape through the themes and revealed the evidence and nature of literacy practices in the life of this family and the perspectives of the participants regarding literacy learning. As suggested by Creswell (2008), my discussion of the findings included how the data helped to answer the research questions, my personal reflections about the meaning of the data, how my interpretations compare or contrast with what is found in the literature, as well as possible limitations to this study and suggestions for future research.

### **Setting**

The description I provided for Wayne County, Indiana, in the introduction of this dissertation in Chapter One, foregrounds an understanding of “rural” and what it means for this work. This description focused on the ideas of low population and an agriculturally-based economy. Within the description, I also

included information about income and poverty levels to provide a clearer understanding of the particular context of this study. Here I provide some additional detail about the rural setting.

Fountain City is in a rural community located in the northeast corner of Wayne County. With a population of almost 800, the residents truly live the life of “small town America.” As you enter Fountain City, you can see the little league baseball field to the west and the playground in the park to the east. Houses dating back to the mid-1800s line the two main thoroughfares. Quiet neighborhoods are filled with children playing in their yards and riding bicycles, young families walking their dogs, and older couples tending to their flower beds or strolling about the town. The largest employer in this community is the local school corporation whose high school graduating class averages 85-90 students. A local pizza parlor, two convenience marts, and a car repair shop are the only official businesses within the limits of the town. There is a growing population of Amish folks, too, and those families run a grocery and bulk food store and sell fresh flower and vegetable plants. Table 1.1 reflects the ages of the population in Fountain City which has a median age of 36 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).

Table 3.1

*Percent of total population of Fountain City, Indiana, by age group*

Ages of Fountain City Residents	% of total population
Under age 18	26%
Age 18 to 24	8.3%
Age 25 to 44	29.3%

Age 45 to 64	22.4%
65 or older	14%

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The town of Fountain City is surrounded by fields of corn and soybeans with occasional dairy and hog farms, and this is the foundation of the economy and culture. The largest employer in this community is the local school corporation whose high school graduating class averages 85-90 students. A local pizza parlor, two convenient marts, and a car repair shop are among the businesses within the limits of the town. There is a growing population of Amish folks, too, who run a grocery and bulk food store and sell fresh flower and vegetable plants. Table 3.2 shows the median income for those living in Fountain City, and Table 3.3 shows the percent of the town's population living below the U.S. poverty line.

Table 3.2

*Median income for Fountain City, IN, with a per capita income of \$15,669 (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2014).*

Categories of population in Fountain City, IN	Annual Income amount
Household	\$34,722
Family	\$40,865
Males	\$32,031
Females	\$21,000

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Table 3.3

*Percent of the town's population below the poverty line for the U.S. (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2014)*

Categories of population in Fountain City, IN	% below poverty line for U.S.
Total Population	8.8%
Families	7.4%
Under age 18	10.3%
65 or over	10.9%

Residents of Fountain City and the surrounding farms consistently demonstrate their commitment to the community and the individuals living within. Efforts are made through local businesses to financially support school clubs and organizations including athletic teams, band and choir groups, and clubs like Future Farmers of America. It is not unusual to see signs posted in the town post office for a fund raiser to support a local family in need, perhaps from a fire or other unfortunate circumstance. They reflect the idea that riches are not always measured by your bank account, and what you are given is expected to be shared with those around you.

### **Data Sources/Participants**

Subjects for this research study included a preschool-age child and her family in rural Wayne County, Indiana, who met the following criteria: child does not regularly attend childcare outside her home; the primary caregiver is the mother in the home; they live within a 20 mile radius of where I reside; and the

child would be enrolling in their local public school district kindergarten. This school district is one in which pre-service teachers from the Elementary Education program at Indiana University East are typically placed for supervised field work and a school district at which many of the teachers are Indiana University East graduates.

**Primary informant.**

The primary source of information for this study was Isabella's mother. Mom is 40 years old, has six living children and has been married to the same man, Isabella's father, for twenty-one years. She graduated from the local high school where all six of her children either now attend or attended. Mom earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology from a regional campus of a major university in Indiana and works part-time as a Course Assistant for the Department of Psychology and the School of Education at that same school. She is also the primary care provider for her husband's grandmother, "Grandma," who lives in the house next to their residence. They live in a single-family home within the town limits of Fountain City.

**Secondary informant.**

An additional subject included a kindergarten teacher who is currently employed by the local elementary school. Permission was requested from the school principal before involving this teacher. After permission was granted from the school principal, I contacted the kindergarten teacher by phone to set an appointment to meet face-to-face with her in her classroom at the school where

she is employed. The kindergarten teacher to whom Isabella was assigned was also asked to participate, but she declined.

The kindergarten teacher who agreed to participate in the study, Mrs. Johnson, is in her fifteenth year of teaching, fourteen of which have been in kindergarten. She is a graduate of a regional campus of a major university in Indiana with a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education.

### **Data Collection/Procedure**

#### **Observations in the home.**

I contacted the mother of the family as a potential subject face-to-face in late Spring 2015. The mother was handed, in person, an Informed Consent Statement, and I answered questions and concerns. Mother was given three (3) days to consider whether or not to participate and was contacted by phone to affirm participation. Written consents were collected within three days of affirmation that the family would agree to participate in the study.

I followed the family in their daily lives, primarily in their home, over a period of eight weeks during the summer of 2015. I spent time in observation three times per week for a total of twenty-four sessions including one afternoon at a local lake. Each session lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes. In addition, I spent two hours with Mom as we created the collages that represent a physical portrait of the literacy culture in their home and daily lives. Primary data consists of the researcher's written descriptive and reflective field notes as well as photographs and transcriptions of audio-recordings of informal interviews and discussions conducted while engaged in the hands-on literacy collage with the



mother. I also used a personal journal of reflections throughout the process of this research study. I interviewed and engaged in conversations with the mother in her home as we looked at photos and created the collage of the events during the research study. The process of creating the collage provided a concrete reflection of literacies identified in their lives and allowed opportunities to reflect and discuss the process of this study and what was learned from the process. It became one more tool used to connect with the mother of the family to build trust and develop a relationship of open communication about the research process.

I was minimally invasive in the routines of the home when conducting observations, staying out of the way of family routines as much as possible. The family had complete control of the schedule of when the observations and interviews occurred. Observations and interviews occurred various days and times throughout each of the weeks of data collection depending on the activities with which the family was engaged. The privacy of the subjects, including the family, was protected. Only pseudonyms are used to identify them as participants when reporting the findings. In addition, I went alone to the home of the participants. All written data were stored in my private files (both paper copies and digital files), and video and audio recordings were stored in locked containers and/or password protected digital files.

### **Interviews with Mom.**

On May 22, 2015, I spent one hour in the late morning with Mom while sitting on the front porch of her house for her initial interview. Interview and

discussion questions with the mother, as we began our time together, included the following:

- How would you define literacy?
- What is the purpose of learning literacy/being literate?
- What literacy practices occur in your home?
- Does your child (the preschooler in the study) participate in literacy learning outside the home? If yes, when/where?
- What is your role in your child's literacy learning?
- Is that role the same for your other children?
- What is the family's role in your child's literacy learning?

The questions were addressed during discussions with the mother, and they were readdressed from time-to-time as her notions of literacy and the presence of literacy learning opportunities and experiences expanded.

During our final interview on August 15, 2015, we met, again, on the front porch of her home. I asked her only two direct questions at that time including "What is literacy?" and "Have your thoughts or ideas about literacy been impacted by your participation in this research study?" We also talked as the collage was being constructed, and I explored with the mother how her ideas of literacy were reflected in the photographs she chose to include.

#### **Interview with kindergarten teacher.**

The kindergarten teacher was handed in person an Informed Consent Statement, and I answered questions and concerns she had at that time. She was then given three days to consider whether or not to participate, and I

contacted her by phone to affirm participation. I collected her consent within three days of affirmation that she would participate.

I met with Mrs. Johnson on May 23, 2105, in the school at which the teacher was employed, outside of school hours and away from students. Mrs. Johnson was given the interview questions before the time of the interview to reduce potential stress from not knowing what would be asked. The kindergarten teacher had complete control over when and where she was interviewed. She was given the right to decline from answering any questions without repercussions.

I went to the kindergarten teacher's classroom for a one-hour interview. Questions for the interview included the following:

- What is literacy?
- Is family/home literacy different from school literacy? How?
- What role do you see the family filling in literacy development?
- What do you believe supports/prepares children for literacy learning in school?
- What information do you gather during home visits prior to the kindergarten school year?
- How do you use the information from the home visits to support students in the transition to school?
- How does this process inform your classroom instruction?

## **Data Analysis**

Data collection and analysis of the field notes from observations, transcripts of interviews and photographs of the shared experiences with Isabella and her family occurred simultaneously. The various types of data contributed differently to the overall study. Interviews with Mom were a kind of pre and post-assessment to measure her initial understanding of literacy and how it had changed during the time I spent sharing and coaching her. The more informal conversations that occurred during the study allowed me to gauge Mom's opinions and feelings about how the study was impacting her and her continued desire to participate in the study. The observational field notes both affirmed my expectations of the types of literacies that might be found in Isabella's life but also to uncover patterns of behavior and beliefs about literacy woven within her daily activities and interactions. The interview with Mrs. Johnson, the kindergarten teacher, allowed me to consider what might be one of many next steps in my research. While this study focused on the literacy already existing in Isabella's life, the kindergarten classroom was to be the next environment in which Isabella would begin to transfer what she had acquired from her first years in her home to the formal school setting. Finally, my own reflective journaling during the process of the study became an instrument through which I could reflect on my process of collecting data, my changing role and the impact of those roles for this research, and questions and ideas that will lead to further research.

Information was organized by type: all interviews, all observations, all photographs and all demographic statistics (Creswell, 2002). First, I read through the data as a preliminary exploratory analysis to gain an overall understanding of the information, to consider how the data might be organized and to considering if more data was needed. (Creswell, 2002). Hand analysis was used for text data using color coding to mark the types of literacy identified and the types of conversations in which Isabella was involved. Additional color coding was guided by my three researcher questions. Descriptions and themes were then developed from the data. Because I used a qualitative method of portraiture and a specifically focused on research in a rural community, it was important to include a considerable description of the setting. Detailed descriptions of the participants were also essential in creating a visual representation of the literacy portrait being developed. In addition to the descriptions, the use of themes gave additional organization to the findings while supporting conclusions and ideas for future research. The interwoven narrative brings the pieces together to form a well-balanced portrait of the meaning making in Isabella's daily life.

## **Conclusion**

This study contributes to theories of power and sociocultural literacy particularly in rural areas. In the future, I plan to use the implications of this study to develop and revise early childhood assessment and curricula. It is my goal to support families in identifying literacy practices in their daily lives and in their communities through conversations, shared experiences, and relationships. In addition, I will use the information gained from this research as a foundation upon

which to encourage classroom teachers to understand the necessity of identifying and affirming the family literacy cultures represented by each of the young learners in their classrooms. This will be accomplished through professional development during which teachers will be educated and trained to broaden their understanding of literacy practices, particularly those that occur outside the classroom in the daily lives of their students. In turn, instructional activities, assessment and curricula would focus on the identification of these family literacy practices and then build upon them to bridge home and school learning.

- What opportunities are observed to be present in the family's rural home and family life that do or may support natural literacy learning in a preschool-aged child during the period of time before she enters kindergarten?
- What is a rural family's perspective of literacy learning in general and, specifically, how it occurs through shared experiences with their child? In other words, do families recognize home literacy experiences as "learning," or do they see them as naturally occurring parts of daily life?
- Does a kindergarten teacher use information regarding her students' home literacies to support students' transitions into school and to inform instruction in her classroom?

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Research Findings**

I am sitting in a red camping chair just on the edge of the cool water. My feet are partially immersed as the shallow waves splash in a calming rhythm. The blue skies above are scattered with puffy white clouds. Isabella has just decided that she is in need of a break from swimming in the lake, floating on her small board, and exploring beneath the surface. She announces that it is time to make a sandcastle, and asks her mother how she should begin. Mom instructs her to get the pink or green bucket and the big shovel. Next, she directs Isabella to a particular area and explains that, in this part closer to the water; the sand is wet which will help the castle stay together. After filling the bucket together, they carefully turn it over and lift it gently to reveal a castle-shaped structure. Mom begins to dig a circle around the perimeter and talks with Isabella about the moat. Isabella is encouraged to fill the bucket with water and dump it to fill the moat. She discovers that there are places where the water leaks and begins a scientific inquiry into the process of making it leak-free. Mom is right there with Isabella, and they talk about digging deeper in some areas and packing more sand up on the sides in other areas. More water is added, and the process continues until Isabella is pleased with the results of her work. This entire experience was full of words and ideas and meaning-making; literacy is seen within the context of Isabella's daily life with her Mom.

The portrait of literacy I set out to render begins to take shape in this chapter as I analyze the field notes from observations, conversations and

interviews and study the photographs and visual art of Isabella, the child participating in this study. I will address each of the research questions and identify the themes that emerged through careful synthesis of evidence from each part of my experience with this family. Together, the data provides the color and shapes that form the portrait of literacy in the life of this preschool child.

### **Supporting Natural Literacy Learning within the Family**

The first question that guided this study was as follows: *What opportunities are observed to be present in the family's rural home and family life that do or may support natural literacy learning in a preschool-aged child during the period of time before she enters kindergarten?* Experiences created the background for the literacy portrait and began forming the basic shapes. I focused on the following experiences that I had with Mom, Isabella and, in some cases, other family members and friends which included going to the beach, going camping at a state park, swimming in the pool at their house, and interactions with friends and family at home including Mom, Dad siblings, neighborhood children/friends and Grandma. Natural literacy learning occurred in almost every situation in the family's home and within the family's life. Table 4.1 reflects examples of the numerous concepts and vocabulary that Isabella acquired through these shared experiences with her family and peers. Isabella understood the meaning of this new terminology because it was naturally occurring in the context of her life. She was able to connect it with her developing schema.



Table 4.1

*Concepts and Vocabulary from Shared Experiences*

<p><b>HOME</b></p> <p><b>Vocabulary/Concepts</b></p> <p>Swimming in pool at home</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shallow/Deep</li> <li>• Goggles</li> <li>• Float/sink</li> </ul> <p>Baking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read pictures/text for ingredients</li> <li>• Measure/Mash</li> <li>• Parts of an egg/breaking an egg</li> <li>• Store-bought vs locally-bought meat</li> </ul> <p>Washing dishes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rinse/Sort</li> <li>• Utensils/whisk/spatula</li> </ul> <p>Dogs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Breeds (English Bulldog, Great Danes, Beagles)</li> <li>• Daily care/wrinkles</li> </ul> <p>Household tasks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chore list (“small trashes” and “feed and water cats”)</li> <li>• Lunch menu/school calendar</li> <li>• Grandma’s grocery list</li> </ul> <p>Technology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read’s books on Mom’s tablet</li> <li>• Computer (internet; Pinterest – “shoes” and “Hello Kitty”; grading papers)</li> </ul> <p>Environmental print</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food/beverages</li> <li>• Microwave/appliances/TV</li> <li>• Remote controls (start/pause/off)</li> </ul> <p>Interactions with Dad</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “bleeding brakes”</li> <li>• Repair/Parts</li> </ul> <p>Traditional literacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Composing words (magnet/dry erase board; typing on computer)</li> <li>• Reading children’s books</li> </ul>	<p><b>FAMILY VACATION/CAMPING AT A STATE PARK</b></p> <p><b>Vocabulary/Concepts</b></p> <p>Animals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Animal tracks</li> <li>• Beaver (signal; communicate)</li> <li>• Snakes (mating season; females larger than males; identifying water snakes)</li> <li>• Birds (cardinals; yellow finches)</li> <li>• Fish (perch; catfish; blue gill; bass)</li> <li>• Litter of kittens</li> </ul> <p>Campfire</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• roasted nuts</li> <li>• temperature of fire different colors</li> </ul> <p>Plants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poison Ivy</li> <li>• Moss</li> <li>• Lilly pads (blooming)</li> </ul> <p>Fishing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Casting/Poles</li> <li>• Cleaning fish/Grinder</li> <li>• Boat/motor</li> <li>• New words EX: “tree bass”</li> </ul> <p>Outdoor Shower (water pressure)</p> <hr/> <p><b>A DAY AT THE BEACH</b></p> <p><b>Vocabulary/Concepts</b></p> <p>In the water</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Float/sink</li> <li>• Paddling/paddleboard</li> <li>• Goggles</li> <li>• Algae</li> <li>• Surfing</li> <li>• Scuba diving</li> <li>• Shallow/deep</li> </ul> <p>On the beach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shells</li> <li>• Moat/Castle/Bridges</li> </ul>
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Photos – creating meaning from picture Music videos/video games Music performance/reading music	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Treasure/finding “gold”</li></ul> Digging (deeper, build)
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Conversations were the dominant feature of the literacy portrait in the life of Isabella. It was strikingly evident that communication during Isabella’s shared experiences is definitely in the fore, and this brought the composition of the literacy portrait together.

As I began to review the field notes from conversations between Isabella and others, specific purposes for verbal interactions became apparent. Many of the conversations were centered on questions being asked, information being shared, or affirmations of Isabella’s behavior. For example, one afternoon, I was invited to sit with Mom in the back yard at their home on the deck of their swimming pool. As I walked up the steps of the deck, Mom asked Isabella to get into the water to show me what she could do. Mom indicated to Isabella that she wanted her to start on the steps of the pool and swim over to the edge. “You know how to do it,” she encouraged. Isabella pushed her feet against the steps and moved her arms as previously instructed, making it to the edge with ease. Isabella immediately looked at Mom who exclaimed, “You did it! Hooray! Good job!” (Mom, personal communication, June 12, 2015).

Mom and I watched Isabella continue swimming and playing in the water for quite a while. At one point, she took a deep breath, stretched out her arms and legs, and became very still as she floated on the surface. After just a moment, she lifted her face, wiped the water off of her face, and asked, “Why was I floating?” Mom replied, “Because you were relaxed. Your body floats when

it's relaxed." Isabella and Mom were sharing the meaning-making process through their conversations during this everyday experience of an afternoon swim.

In Table 4.2, I include the types of verbal interactions from field notes taken during a day at the beach and two different afternoons at their home. Isabella was engaged as any others present in the process of asking questions and sharing information with those around her. A more specific analysis of the exact conversations is not necessary to gain the overall understanding that verbalizations were interactive and used to create meaning of the shared experiences in Isabella's life. She was not just "talked to," but was given opportunities to exchange ideas with others. She was respected as a communication partner with others in her family, including the adults. Her innate curiosity was affirmed and supported as the people in her life, particularly her family, welcomed her questions, connected new information with previous experiences and knowledge, and encouraged her to explore her world.

Table 4.2

*Types of verbal interactions from conversations during a day at the beach and two home observations*

Types of verbal interactions	Words spoken by Isabella	Words spoken by others (Mom, siblings, similar-aged peers/friends)
Information	41	36
Affirmation	1	9
Questions	23	41

## **Family Perspectives on Literacy Learning**

The second question that guided my research was as follows: *What is a rural family's perspective of literacy learning in general and, specifically, how it occurs through shared experiences with their child? In other words, do families recognize home literacy experiences as "learning," or do they see them as naturally occurring parts of daily life?*

During our initial interview, it became evident that Mom did not share my perspective regarding the tremendous amount of literacy learning that I had already observed in Isabella's life. Specifically, Mom did not view all of the vocabulary and meaning making through concepts being shared as literacy. During our first interview, Mom defined literacy in a more traditional manner to include reading and writing; she did, however, add an affective component by stating literacy is to "help her [Isabella] function."

The statement she made elaborating the role of literacy hints that Mom may have understood that literacy is more than just reading and writing, but she did not take that opportunity to articulate this idea further in that moment. Later in our conversation, however, Mom affirmed her belief in the affective component of literacy when I asked her out her own role in Isabella's literacy learning. She stated that she supports Isabella's literacy learning to "help her function better and help her express her feelings and thoughts." This idea of literacy moves beyond viewing literacy as only a function to navigate life and encompasses the idea that literacy is a tool for self-expression.

Mom recognized some of the literacy learning in Isabella's daily life from the very beginning of the time I spent with the family. She identified reading and writing that occurred in their daily lives including chores, interactions with siblings and modeling of reading for enjoyment. She acknowledged that learning new vocabulary words in the experiences of daily life is "literacy," as she reflected on the day at the beach and using specific words such as building a "moat" for the castle (see Figure 4.1). What I found interesting, though, was that she specifically identified the latter as literacy learning "outside the home." This makes sense in that the experience occurred physically away from their residence, but it certainly flowed into later conversations among the family as they were seated around the dinner table or relaxing on the porch swing and chatting about their shared experiences

Figure 4.1

*Mom and Isabella dug a moat for her sand castle.*



My final interview with Mom revealed a noticeable difference in her understanding and beliefs about literacy. When I asked her to define literacy, she replied as follows:

Literacy is everything! Every aspect of Isabella's life like when I am cooking with her - all her activities and parts of her life play a part in her literacy growth. For example, part of what our family does is to take care of Grandma. Isabella already has a concept of a mammogram because Grandma is a breast cancer survivor, and we had to take her to get a mammogram. (Mom, personal communication, August 15, 2015)

Isabella asked Mom questions about Grandma's health and why Grandma forgets so much, so Mom talked to her about Alzheimer's disease and the process of getting older. Mom recognized that not every child would know about this because her daily life might not include caring for an older family member. Mom now recognized the meaning-making that was happening as Isabella learned new vocabulary and connected it with life experiences.

In our initial interview, Mom believed her role in Isabella's literacy learning to be "the most important of any other family member" because it is involved daily interactions between them and she gets to "help Isabella function better and help her express her feelings and thoughts." She perceived the role of the family as a whole to also be important, particularly Isabella's interactions with her older siblings and Grandma.

Isabella is the youngest child in what most may consider a large family with 6 siblings including young adults and teenagers, I asked Mom about her role and the nature of her interactions with Isabella's brothers and sisters as it related to literacy learning. She shared that, once children "learned to read, parents take their hands off, or at least past the elementary years" (Mom, personal

communication May 22, 2015). After the initial process of learning to read, she also felt that another “big moment in reading” was when her children learned to read actual textbooks. During this transition to comprehending more complex information, she played a more active role in their literacy learning.

Mom recognized that Isabella’s relationship with her father is also important. Besides contributing to her social-emotional development, Dad is able to offer Isabella new experiences to broaden her literacy learning. This is evident with some of the new phrases and meanings Isabella learned from spending time with her dad such as “bleeding the brakes.”

Our final interview, once again, was in contrast to our first conversation and exposed a change in Mom’s consideration of her role in her children’s literacy learning. She declared that the people in her house, and referred to herself specifically, had “the biggest role in her children’s literacy learning – even bigger than the school or the public education system. The time they spend with me is way more valuable than time in the classroom regarding their overall literacy lives” (Mom, personal communication, August 15, 2015). She felt “more responsibility as their coaches,” and said that “since this process of the research study has started, I value her [Isabella’s] questions just a little bit more and listen to what she has to say just a little bit closer. She will ask me something, and I will think that this is a literacy moment, and I have the chance to explain this to her” (Mom, personal communication, August 15, 2015).

Mom transferred this understanding of her role with Isabella to her roles in the lives of her other children, too. She mentioned that one of her sons told her

that he had been digging outside with one of his friends and finding objects, and they had decided to mark it as a “construction site.” She said she listened differently to him and embraced all that he was learning at home. Learning that, she believed, he could not get at school. She listed multiple roles that she plays in the lives of her teenaged and young adult children including teacher, coach and mentor, and decided that her roles with all of her children were the same but the content changed as they matured. For example, one of her older daughters and her fiancé’ were preparing to purchase a home, and Mom was able to share her own experiences and teach them about financial literacy. Mom saw how the vocabulary and information within this situation offered her an opportunity to support their literacy learning even as young adults.

Though Grandma had always held an honored and respected role as matriarch of the family, the final interview with Mom also revealed a growing appreciation for Grandma as a mentor and teacher in her children’s lives regarding literacy development. Mom expressed her enjoyment and gratitude for all the words and ideas that her children learned from conversations with Grandma including stories of her childhood and trinkets she has collected throughout her life’s adventures. Mom recognized that her children were able to connect with Grandma through these stories and make special meanings of ideas such as “don’t waste” and “enjoy just being together.” Figure 5.1 is a photograph of Grandma cooking with Isabella. Grandma talks with Isabella as she teaches her about cooking and other household activities. These



interactions with Grandma add yet another layer of meaning making to Isabella's daily life.

It became clear through my interview with Mom and conversations throughout the process of creating a collage portrait together that most of the literacy experiences present in the home were initially not recognized as "learning." What also manifested was the idea that home and school literacies were separate and that home literacies were not at all conceived to support what is considered by both Mom and the kindergarten teacher to be school literacy.

Figure 5.1

*Grandma and Isabella cooking together at Grandma's house.*



At first, the family, particularly Mom, did not express an understanding of the natural literacy learning already occurring in the home beyond reading and writing text. As we discussed the oral language that connects the family, the

mom began to understand more clearly the broader aspects of literacy that include orality and the process of making meaning that occurred in their home every day. During our final interview, Mom spoke of home literacy as being valuable and how she felt almost overwhelmed now with the responsibility of literacy learning in their everyday lives. Mom mentioned that her oldest child was due to have a baby within a few months. "I know how much I have learned from this research process, and I can participate more in his literacy learning, too" (Mom, personal communication, August 15, 2015). She recognized that the literacy shared and practiced in their home every day was an important part of the overall meaning-making process in her children's lives.

### **The Kindergarten-Home Connection**

The third question I asked in this research was "*Does a kindergarten teacher use information regarding her students' home literacies to support students' transitions into school and to inform instruction in her classroom?*" To explore this, I interviewed a kindergarten teacher at the school Isabella would soon be attending, although not her assigned teacher.

Although she elaborated aspects of reading and writing using different terms, the kindergarten teacher's ideas regarding literacy were similar to the mother's initial ideas. She defined literacy as "the ability to connect many skills to become a reader and writer" (K. Johnson, personal communication, May 23, 2015). Mrs. Johnson referred to several skills including phonics, phonemic awareness, letter/sound recognition, fluency, voice, and schema as "pieces of literacy." She added "enthusiasm" as an additional piece as she went on to

describe literacy as a puzzle and that “once you have all the pieces, the puzzle comes together beautifully” (K. Johnson, personal communication, May 23, 2015). This idea of a puzzle revealed an underlying belief that literacy is an end product of itself and not a process. Once each part is added, the picture is complete and finished. This would appear to support the “checklist” approach to literacy learning in that each skill or experience necessary to reach the end goal called literacy can be achieved and added to the whole picture at one given time.

Mrs. Johnson also indicated that she “believed that school literacy is teaching all the necessary skills to become literate” (K. Johnson, personal communication, May 23, 2015). This notion does not recognize that children enter school with certain capabilities nor welcome the idea of using home literacies and children’s existing capabilities as a foundation upon which school curriculums could build for literacy learning.

During our interview, Mrs. Johnson made a clear distinction between home and school literacies. She identified some home literacy experiences that would support and prepare children for literacy learning in school including “soft lullabies, conversations, questions, reading, creating, and playing with our children.” What became a point of reflection for me was the statement that she then made about home literacy as follows: “I feel that literacy at home is more for entertainment and enjoyment.” I wondered why she believed this and what was happening in the classroom regarding literacy that was not “entertaining and enjoyable.” Mrs. Johnson did think that “a love for learning” was the most important skill for the teacher to model and that, even with the necessity of

learning skills, it is essential that reading and writing also be for enjoyment.

Mrs. Johnson identified ways that she believed the school supported continued literacy learning at home once a child enters kindergarten. Reading bags containing skill-appropriate books, handouts with key questions for parents to ask their children in before, during and after reading and a reading log and are sent home with students weekly. She described some of the school-wide efforts to support families in understanding literacy learning, too, including Literacy Nights, Bingo for Books, and Make It – Take It events. I noticed that these efforts continued to reflect the power of the schools to define literacy rather than demonstrating any efforts to gather information about the literacy practices and literacy skills already being developed in the home. Further, it defined “home literacies” as occurring within didactic, teacher-planned activities to be carried out by the parents.

Even if families in this small community were aware of the literacy learning that was part of their culture, they do not seem to have opportunities to communicate with the teachers and schools regarding the literacies already occurring in their homes. The families do, however, have an opportunity to meet the kindergarten teachers during the summer before their child enters school through home visits. These visits that are conducted by each of the kindergarten teachers with the students enrolled in their classes for the upcoming school year are meant to be very informal and include the teacher giving an overview of the full day schedule and expectations of the first week of school. Parents are then asked to share what they would like the teacher to know about their child, and

Mrs. Johnson also attempts to engage the child in conversation. Mrs. Johnson felt that meeting the parents and seeing where the child lives gave her a little information and “a peek at their home life” (K. Johnson, personal communication, May 23, 2015). She did not, however, do home visits with the intention of coming to understand how and in what way the child may have experienced literacy and/or learning in general, nor did she look upon it as an opportunity to plan and encourage at-home literacy activities that would fit each child in the context of his home and family life.

Mrs. Johnson indicated that the role of the family in literacy development was to “be educated on the importance of literacy and how reading to their child each day can be quite beneficial” (K. Johnson, personal communication, May 23, 2015). She went on to explain that parents often help their children with homework, but, “they do not always understand the purpose or objective of the assignment” (K. Johnson, personal communication, May 23, 2015). In other words, she believed that it is the teacher’s responsibility to work with parents to help them understand how they can help their child succeed.

It was evident that the home visit by the kindergarten teacher to her incoming students was being utilized as an opportunity to collect basic information but not about the literacy culture of the family. The kindergarten teacher stated that she “used the home visit as an icebreaker. I try to take a few quick notes after each visit, and I take a photo of the family” (K. Johnson, personal communication, May 23, 2015). She noted that knowing names at parent night and on the first day of school was very helpful and that she felt home

visits “put our families at ease and the students feel like they know me because after all I was at their house” (K. Johnson, personal communication, May 23, 2015). This informal approach to the home visit certainly addresses common fears and apprehensiveness of families and children, but it does little to inform the instructional practices that might serve to connect home and school literacies.

It does not seem to be the case that Mrs. Johnson is unaware or even totally unappreciative of literacy learning that may occur in the home. In fact, she said that she believed knowing more about the kinds of literacy learning that occurs in the homes of her incoming students would benefit her instruction. She shared that “all students come from many different types of homes.

Understanding the resources the parents have to offer their child helps teacher better encourage and promote early literacy” (K. Johnson, personal communication, May 23, 2015). She described that the local school where she is employed is hoping to offer parenting classes in the future, and added that “educating parents on how to help promote literacy is key” (K. Johnson, personal communication, May 23, 2015). This approach to connecting with families about literacy learning supports the perceived power of the schools to define literacy.

### **Collage Portraits**

The collage portraits that Mom and I created at the conclusion of the data collection portion of the study have become physical representations of the journey I shared with Isabella, Mom and the family in understanding literacy as a process of meaning making. Figure 5.2 is a photograph of the collage portrait created by Mom which is her perspective of the literacy that occurs in Isabella’s

daily life. I asked Mom to share the reasons she chose these particular photographs, and she explained that her understanding of literacy has changed because of her time with me during this study and our conversations about literacy. She now believes that Isabella's relationships with her family and friends are the foundation for meaning making in her life and the core of her literacy learning. She wanted the collage portrait to reflect the important people in Isabella's meaning making process and some of the activities in which I was also able to participate during the study. Mom chose to include a piece of Isabella's illustrated writing, too, because she continued to understand the importance of supporting Isabella in traditional reading and writing skills along with the daily

Figure 5.2

*Mom's collage portrait representing literacy in Isabella's daily life.*



Figures 5.3 is a photograph of my collage portrait which represents the literacy that I identified in Isabella's daily life including meaning making during experiences and conversations with family and friends. I have included some key

words that reflect the process I experienced in identifying literacy in Isabella's including "remember, connected, family, experiences, relationships, share, friends and life."

Figure 5.3

*My collage portrait representing literacy in Isabella's daily life.*



### Emergent Themes

My analyses of the findings of this research lead to the identification of several key themes that emerged. The first is the idea of **connections** including connecting to ideas, people and the past. Literacy could be seen as the thread that bound/united/attached Isabella to ideas and people both at home and at school.

Through shared experiences and meaningful conversations packed with learning and reminiscing, Isabella was connected with a variety of ideas and



perspectives from those around her in all aspects of her home life. Many of these interactions also connected here with a past heritage and culture. Grandma sat on the porch swing with Isabella and told stories of when she was a child in Detroit, Michigan, during the Depression. Though her short-term memory fails more frequently, she described with great details how, on hot days in the summer, they stripped to their “skivvies,” gathered in the streets, and played in the water coming from the fire hydrants.

In addition to connections made at home, Mrs. Johnson mentioned **connection** as part of the process of literacy being “the ability to connect many skills to become a reader and writer” (K. Johnson, personal communication, May 23, 2015). She shared her belief about how literacy learning at school connects students to other people and ideas in the following statement:

Literacy connects people and perspectives. We can discuss characters and places in the books. Story time often leads to share time and discussion. Literacy helps us better understand our students thinking and allows us to understand them on a personal level. In the K classroom we have Mystery readers as well! I love to allow parents, students, and the community come and read to our class as good role models. (K. Johnson, personal communication, May 23, 2015)

Another theme that emerged while analyzing data was that of **wealth** regarding the amount of literacy learning occurring in the homes of this preschool-aged child. My emotions during my interactions with the

family were clear. I experienced a deep sense of satisfaction with the richness of interactions between Isabella and those who love her and want her to grow and develop and learn. There was never a thought of “deficit” or that she was not being prepared for school. There was so much learning going on all of the time such as new vocabulary like “moat”; adding new definitions to already existing vocabulary such as “clean” because cleaning a fish is not the same as cleaning yourself after a fun day in the woods; and understanding that information is found on kitchen appliances that support knowing how to use them (numbers on a toaster that tell you how long the bread will be cooking). Unlike school, there is no requirement of a specific amount of isolated “reading time.” Reading, writing, listening, speaking and thinking about all of that occurs naturally and is woven throughout the daily experiences of home and family life.

Some of the most powerful moments for me during this research study occurred during my final interview with Mom, and it is through these conversations that a third theme emerged, **family culture**. Mom’s voice reflected excitement that she understood how “day to day activities play into the big picture of what literacy is,” and “the whole realization of culture. I didn’t have a word but now I do – my family’s literacy culture” (Mom, personal communication, August 15, 2015). The collage portraits that Mom and I created are physical representations of the literacy culture of Isabella’s family, too, because the photographs and words reflect who and what Isabella’s Mom and I believe have

the most powerful impact on the meaning making being developed in Isabella's life and in their home.

As I looked at the data as a whole, a final theme that emerged was that of ***disconnect*** specifically between the natural meaning making that identified literacy learning in Isabella's home and the task-oriented skills that defined literacy learning at school. There is ***disconnect*** at the core of how literacy is characterized in the different environments of home and school. This is evident in the contrast between Mom's view of literacy as so intricately woven in all of Isabella's life experiences and Mrs. Johnson's perspective that literacy is a set of individual, isolated skills most effectively learned at school.

These themes of ***connection/disconnection, wealth and family culture*** are central to the conclusions, implications and ideas for future research which are discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Conclusions, Implications and Suggestions for Future Research**

I approached this study ready to list all of the types of literacy and purposes for literacy, and I am leaving with an enduring understanding of literacy as a social process. This idea of social literacy began as “head knowledge” for me and has now transitioned to “heart knowledge.” Through this research, it has become obvious that the lifelong process of meaning making that is literacy would look differently without the connections to people, their ideas and the past that was a part of the daily lives of Isabella and her family. No wonder public schools have such a difficult time teaching literacy when it has become a list of formulaic instructions. The Social Sciences do not involve only history or economics; mathematics is not just addition and subtraction, and literacy is certainly not just reading and writing.

There were three major themes that developed from analysis of the data including connection/disconnection, wealth and family culture. Connections were made to people and ideas as literacy learning developed during shared experiences in Isabella’s life. Literacy learning in schools is, in contrast, less connected to the people and ideas in Isabella’s daily life and more connected with books being read and specific, isolated skills being developed. The wealth of literacy in Isabella’s daily life became evident as the definition of literacy was expanded to include the meaning making that occurred during experiences and conversations. The family’s beliefs about literacy, its importance and its uses combined to create the family literacy culture in the home. I will revisit these

themes to draw conclusions, discover implications and create suggestions for future research.

We have reduced literacy to a set of skills when it is really a tool to connect – connect to our world, connect to those we are about and connect to our sense of self. That is why literacy is more meaningful and “easier to learn” if is fully connected to the learner because that is the purpose of literacy. It is a social practice because humans are social, and literacy is a tool connecting people and ideas. Connection was a major theme in the findings of this research, and these connections to others and thoughts and beliefs from both the past and the present were made through reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Isabella was able to connect her own ideas with those shared by the friends and family surrounding her, and they were able to reciprocate. Relationships were built through these connections. Intergenerational connections were particularly precious as Grandma enriched Isabella’s understanding of the world by sharing past experiences about her own childhood. Reminiscing and remembering became an integral part of learning and making meaning of the world around this preschool child.

It became apparent that this study was equally about family culture as it was about literacy. Through my time with Isabella and her family, I came to several realizations regarding the behaviors, beliefs and values they accept about the literacy process. This literacy culture is not actively contemplated by those within it, yet it is naturally inherited by the next generation through communication and shared experiences. Once again, I am reminded that I

entered the research study seeking “head knowledge” which included identifying literacies in the lives of Isabella and her family, but I left with the “heart knowledge” that this experience was an amazing portrait of making meaning through shared experiences that connected people and ideas. This idea of family literacy cultures could become a powerful piece of knowledge informing classroom curriculum and instruction particularly in the early childhood environment.

## **Implications**

### **Implications for Home and Family Literacy.**

It was noted from my first interview with Mom that she believed her role is important in Isabella’s literacy learning process, but that is without state-mandated academic standards and standardized testing dictating and defining “appropriate” or “required” literacy skills. She said her role changed as her children were in school longer. She feels responsible for her child’s education, but does the school really support this or do they encourage the separation of “school learning” from what occurs at home? This is her sixth child in school; she is not new to what learning to read and write at school looks like. Yet, she was not able to connect the oral language and non-print literacies to the process of reading and writing until after we had spent time together and identified conversations and shared experiences as literacy learning. At first, literacy was a list of skills her children have to learn and demonstrate on standardized tests at school. But, even from the first interview, Mom referred to her role as helping Isabella express how she feels and “function better.” It was not until after I shared

ideas about literacy being meaning-making throughout their lives that she was able to see all of the ways literacy was being supported in Isabella's life even before entering a school environment.

What I have learned from Mom and how her notions and awareness of literacy changed over time was that families may benefit from coaching or mentoring with regards to identifying and understanding a broader definition of literacy and the literacy learning that occurs in the homes and daily lives of their children. Because most families only know the more narrow, skills-focused definition of literacy given by schools, there may not be any way for them to become aware of a broader definition of literacy as a natural, meaning-making process in the daily lives of their children. It would be important for families to receive this support in understanding the literacy learning already occurring in their homes before their children reach the age to attend school so they can become partners with schools in sharing their own family literacy cultures and continue to be a part of their child's literacy learning even after he/she is more immersed in school literacy.

### **Implications for School Literacy.**

This research has really been a study of the literacy culture of a rural family with a preschool-aged child, and that idea can be transferred to educational practices within kindergarten classrooms to support students in exploring the literacy cultures of their homes and using this as a foundation for the literacy practices and instruction that occurs in the classroom.

Using children's own stories as texts in the classroom would support these young readers and writers in bringing their own experiences into the school setting. It is common practice to invite children to write about their experiences, and this often occurs with explicit writing instruction during Writing Workshop (Calkins, 2013). The next step would be to allow students to reflect on these stories and share them with their peers as viable texts upon which to connect people and ideas (Paley, 1991).

One specific application for the benefit of using home literacy cultures to inform educators and their classroom instructional practices would be the development of home literacy portrait projects at schools and early childhood centers. Children and their families could share their beliefs, values and understanding of literacy through the process of creating a collage similar to what Mom and I created through this research study. This would support the families in understanding the broader perspective of literacy, and it could encourage classroom teachers to acknowledge these literacies and use them to inform their instructional practices. It would impact both the cognitive and affective domains of the classroom environment to build the curriculum on the literacy knowledge and experiences of the young students and include the culture of the families within the time they spend together in the classroom.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

There are several ideas regarding future research that have been prompted for me by this study. Focusing on family and home practices, beliefs and values surrounding literacy would be beneficial to developing curriculum that



is responsive and respectful to the beliefs and values modeled for children by their families. Identifying these home literacy cultures might also inform classroom teachers regarding instructional practices impacting both cognitive and affective domains in the school environment. As mentioned in the review of literature, research regarding the importance of oral language clarifies the importance of talking with young children to support listening and speaking (Street, 1995; Makin, Diaz & McLachlan, 2007), but there is also value to be found in educating parents concerning the significance of expanding opportunities children are given to experience new things. A trip to an expensive amusement park is not necessary. With the increasing amounts of time children spend in front of screens (Subrahmanyam, Kraut, Greenfield, & Gross, 2000), just spending time in the back yard watching ants hard at work or in the neighborhood park experimenting with how hard they can pump their legs on the swings would provide them with background knowledge upon which they could build vocabulary and expand their thinking.

Observing the powerful impact Grandma had on the literacy learning in Isabella's life exposed the suggestion that intergenerational literacies are an under-utilized resource and should be studied and utilized as a source of knowledge more frequently in the lives of the younger. Mobile lifestyles often facilitate generations of families residing miles apart, and this can be a challenge. Modern technology is often the bridge between families, so studying the the use of technology in connecting families to support and broaden home literacies might also be worthwhile.

Another area of research suggested by this study involves what type of literacy instruction occurs in early childhood classrooms. This might include both preschool and kindergarten environments and encompass both private and public schools and centers. It is important to note that layers of requirements and expectations dictate an unjustifiably oversized portion of the instruction within the public school. These “rules” are set by lawmakers and other government officials both in and out of the education realm, and their decisions are too often influenced by curriculum publishers and other such corporations that are financially driven. It would be significant to study what type of instruction, activities and testing are actually required in the 90 minute reading block in public schools and what gets accomplished. Comparing that with the curriculum, instruction and learning that occur in public classrooms would be insightful.

Because my current experience focuses on early childhood and elementary teacher preparation, it is imperative to reflect if more attention needs to be given to home/family literacies in teacher preparation programs for elementary education. This preparation should include a broader, socio-cultural definition of literacy in the context of local and family cultures represented in classrooms. It would also be important to support preservice teachers in recognizing the opportunities they could create for students to share their own experiences and ideas with others in the classroom to contribute to the classroom or school literacy culture. Effort should also be made to instruct preservice teachers in ways that classroom teachers can extend an invitation to parents and families to become partners in their child’s literacy learning process.

If preservice teachers could enter the teaching profession already aware of the impact this partnership could have on student learning, family literacy could become a viable resource in their classrooms.

### **Limitations**

Although I focused on a child living with her family in a rural area for this study, I did not compare this family's culture or Isabella's experiences to that of an urban child's. It is impossible, therefore, for me to draw any conclusions about how these two may be similar or different. Are Isabella's experiences really all that different in terms of literacy learning because she lives in a rural setting than they would be if she were being raised in a large city? That is not clear. However, I can hypothesize that what was found to be important in this study – connections being made, the wealth of meaning making within the family setting, and the disconnection between school and home – may be similar.

I also acknowledge that Isabella is being raised by her two biological parents who have at least some post-secondary training/education and are gainfully employed. There is no comparison being made with children from single-parent homes or from children living in poverty.

### **Final Remarks**

At the conclusion of my final interview with Mom, I asked her if there was anything else she wanted to share or to be included in my findings. Without hesitation, she replied, "What I have taken from this time with you is to embrace the simplest moments and know how impactful they can be on her [Isabella's] overall learning and literacy" (Mom, personal communication, August 15, 2015).

This realization shared by Mom gave me affirmation and hope. I was affirmed that, though this study was focused and only included one family, it made a positive impact and that, through Mom, Isabella and her entire family can understand literacy learning and meaning making as a natural part of their daily lives. I am also hopeful that this could be the beginning of many more opportunities to empower parents and families as their children's coaches in the literacy learning process and to support them in partnering with classroom teachers to connect and continue this meaning making at school.

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- Yilmaz, A., & McMullen, M. B. (2010). A study of facilitating early literacy curriculum improvement in Head Start classrooms. *Education and Science*, 35(158), 169-183.



*Curriculum Vita*

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Indiana University East School of Education  
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**EDUCATION**

Ed.D. Curriculum Studies, February 2016, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN

Major studies: Early Childhood Education Minor studies: Literacy Education

Research interests: Family literacy; Oral language development; Play

M.S., Elementary Education, May 2009, Indiana University East, Richmond, IN

Master's project: *Impact of Oral Language Intervention on Early Literacy Learning*,

Research Director: Brenda Buckner, Ph.D.

Alternative Routes to Certification (Elementary Teaching Licensure program), 2005-  
2006, Indiana University East, Richmond, IN.

Early Childhood Associate certificate, 1996, Ivy Tech State College, Richmond, IN

Graduate Courses in Early Childhood Education, 1990-1994, Anderson University,  
Anderson, IN

B.S., Bible and Church Music, May 1988, Johnson Bible College, Knoxville, TN

**PROFESSIONAL LICENSES**

*2000 to present*

State of Indiana Elementary Education Teaching License:  
Grades 1-6; 7 and 8 non-departmentalized  
Kindergarten Endorsement; Reading Minor

## PROFESSIONAL POSITIONS

- 2012 to present*      Lecturer, School of Education, Indiana University East, Richmond, IN  
Reading II/Social Studies Methods and Field Experience; General methods for Elementary Teachers; Early Childhood Curriculum; Emergent Literacy and Trade books in the Classroom
- 2009 to 2012*      Visiting Lecturer, School of Education, Indiana University East, Richmond, IN  
Emergent Literacy, Reading II/Social Studies Methods and Field Experience; Early Childhood Curriculum and Trade books in the Classroom
- 2005 to 2009*      Elementary Teacher (Kindergarten and First Grade)  
Crestdale Elementary School, Richmond, IN  
Reading Recovery Teacher  
Primary Literacy Interventionist
- 2003 to 2005*      Mentor Teacher, Early Childhood Associate online program, Ivy Tech State College
- 2000 to 2005*      Early Childhood Classroom Teacher, Early Learning and Family Literacy Center, Richmond, IN
- 2002 to 2004*      Preschool Director/Owner, ABC Preschool & Happy Times Preschool, Fountain City, IN
- 1996 to 2000*      Parent Educator, Birth-to-Five, Inc., Richmond, IN

## AWARDS AND HONORS

- 2009      Outstanding Graduate Student in Education, IU East, School of Education.  
Initiated into Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society
- 2014      Nominated for IU East Teaching Award for New Faculty

## RESEARCH

### PUBLICATIONS

**Williams, D.** (2012, Summer). Language and literacy: Birth to age 3. *Infant-Toddler Specialists of Indiana* (research brief).  
<http://www.cfs.purdue.edu/ITSI/docs/briefs/LanguageLiteracy.pdf>.

### GRANTS

Yates, F. & Williams, D. (2011) *Campus Impact Grant*. **Funded \$2,250 through grant with a \$1,000 match by IU East – total of \$3,250.00** “Connections Discovery” was a service-learning project in which IU East students extended their educational impact in the community by increasing the numbers of students they serve with our “connections kits” literacy bags that are now available at the IU East library for area educators and families.

### PRESENTATIONS

**Williams, D.** (2014). *Think outside the box*. Indiana Association for the Education of Young Children Annual Conference. Indianapolis, IN.

Huxhold, D., Keller, M., McKormick, K., McMullen, M., **Williams, D.**, Wood, L. (2013). *Ashes! Ashes! We All Fall Down! Art, Play, Literature, Respectful Dialogue: Responding to Stress & Crisis for Young Children*. The Gathering: Early Childhood Ireland. Dublin, Ireland.

**Williams, D.** (2011 – 2013). *Teaching Economics through Children’s Literature*. Presented at IU East and local elementary schools. Sponsored by Indiana Council for Economic Education.

Buckner, B. & **Williams, D.** (2012). *What did you say? The Relationship of Oral Language to Early Literacy Learning*. International Reading Association Annual Conference. Chicago, IL.

Buckner, B. & **Williams, D.** (2011). *Oral language strategies for supporting reading and writing in the classroom*. Indiana State Reading Association Conference. Indianapolis, IN.

**Williams, D.** (2011.) *Experiences, Conversation, and Relationships: The Keys to School Readiness*. Whitewater Valley Chapter of the Indiana Association for the Education of Young Children Annual Conference. Richmond, IN.

**Williams, D.** (2010). *Oral language and literacy learning*. Indiana Association for the Education of Young Children Annual Conference. Indianapolis, IN.

**Williams, D.** (2010). *Dialogic Reading*. Birth-to-Five, Inc. staff training. Richmond, IN.

**Williams, D.** (2009). *Oral Language Development and Literacy Learning*. Professional Development Workshop, Fayette County School Corporation. Brookville, IN.

Miller, C.; Lingenfelter, G.; **Williams, D.** (2008). *Using Positive Behavior Support in the classroom and school-wide*. Indiana Student Achievement Institute Conference on Learning. Indianapolis, IN.

## RESEARCH PROJECTS

**Williams, D.** (2014-2016). *Portraits of literacy: Meaning-making in the homes of rural Indiana preschoolers*. This project is for completion of my dissertation as required for my doctoral degree. The purpose of this research is to support families in acknowledging that “natural” literacy learning is happening in their homes and is essential in preparing children for school and lifelong learning

**Williams, D.** (2013). *Play-based practices in the Kindergarten classroom*. The purpose of the research was to observe, analyze and assess the play-based activities included within the curriculum and instruction of kindergarten classrooms.

**Williams, D.** (2012). *Student and Cooperating Teacher Perceptions of Two-Semester Field Experience Placements*. Examining the perception and experience of pre-service and cooperating teachers for year-long classroom field placements

Barbre, J. & **Williams, D.** (2011-12). *High Definition Praxis*. Examining teacher perceptions of high definition video for purposes of pedagogical reflection.

Barbre, J. & **Williams, D.** (2011). *Student Perceptions of the Value of Integrated Course Work in Teacher Preparation*. Examining student perceptions of the value of an integrated methods course as part of their teacher preparation program.

## TEACHING

### Courses taught Indiana University East

*\*Courses developed or substantially revised*

**+Developed** and implemented all online courses for Early Childhood minor.

E337/E506 \*Classroom Learning Environments

E301/E501 \*Emergent Literacy

E325 \*Social Studies in the Elementary Classroom

E341/L504 \*Methods Of Teaching Reading 2

M401 Field Experience for E341 and E325 Methods

M311/E535 \*Methods for Kindergarten and Elementary Teachers

E449/E559 Trade Books in the Elementary Classroom

E335/F500 +Introduction to Early Childhood Education

E336/E507 +Play as Development

E351/E525 +Foundations of Early Care and Education

## GRADUATE COMMITTEE

### Graduate Student Committees and Role

**Research committee chair**, Angela Longnecker's culminating research for M.S. Ed.

Degree: *Comparative study of phonics programs for a first grade classroom.*

**Research committee chair**, Mark Kosisko's culminating research for M.S. Ed. Degree:

*Developing RTI strategies for elementary Science.*

**Research committee member**, Kara Brush's culminating research for M.S. Ed. Degree:

*The practice of "looping" in the elementary grades.*

**Research committee chair**, Randy Hollingsworth's culminating research for M.S. Ed.

degree: *Using strategies from the Literacy Collaborative framework to support literacy practice at home.*

## SERVICE

### NATIONAL

**Reviewer** for proposals in the areas of literacy and early childhood education for the 2015 AERA annual meeting.

**Reviewer** for book draft prior to publication at request of publishers: *Early childhood curriculum for all learners (chapters 10, 12, 13, 14).* Sage Publishing, 2013.

## **SERVICE (cont'd)**

### **STATE & REGIONAL**

**IAEYC Early Childhood Higher Education Forum**, 2014 to present; Planning committee 2014-15.

**IAEYC Public Policy Committee**, 2014-present.

**Public Policy Representative**, 2011 to 2012, Whitewater Valley Chapter of the Indiana Association for the Education of Young Children.

### **CAMPUS AND SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**

**Editor** of children's book. Scales, T. (2014). *Build a Rock*. Wall Street Publishing.

**Designer/Developer** of five (5) online courses for Early Childhood minor.

**Member** of Course Development Team for M311/E535, a methods course for kindergarten and elementary school teachers, Spring 2012.

**Mentor** for undergraduate students with Dr. Brenda Buckner in preparation for Summer Literacy Experience, Summer 2012.

**Member** of IU East School of Education Elementary Education Committee, 2012 to present.

**Member** of IU East School of Education Admissions and Retention committee, 2012 to present.

### **COMMUNITY**

**Director** of Preschool Literacy Workshops, Summer 2012.

**Guest Reader** for Third Grade Academy, Richmond, IN, Summer 2012 - 2014

**Presenter** of "Teaching Economics Through Children's Literature" workshops, 2011 to present.

## **COMMUNITY (cont'd)**

**Presenter** of a series of workshops for professional development at Northeastern Elementary School, Fountain City, IN, for reading vocabulary & comprehension, November 2013 and February 2014.

**Presenter** “Developmentally Appropriate Practice” workshops for Early Head Start, Wayne County, IN. April 2014.

## **PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1995 to present.

Indiana Association for the Education of Young Children, 1995 to present.

Whitewater Valley Chapter of the Indiana Association for the Education of Young Children, 1995 to present

International Reading Association, 2000 to present.

National Council for the Social Studies, 2009 to 2014.

American Educational Research Association, 2013 to present.

SIG: Early Education and Child Development of the American Educational Research Association

Kindergarten Readiness Subcommittee of Countywide Partnership for Youth, Wayne County, IN, 2010 to 2012.